

## ALL OR NOTHING

BY CHARLES CALDWELL DOBIE

AT Pedro, the other two passengers in the Halfmoon Bay bus crawled out and, as the driver shot the car forward, their voices floated back with sharp insistence:

"Anson Carr?"

"Yes—you know, the man who came into all that money."

Anson Carr heard the query and answer distinctly, and almost for the first time he realized that he had become a person of importance. The thought both pleased and irritated him. He had always had a craving to stand out from the crowd, to be a person of distinction. He had looked forward to the day when the public would whisper as he passed:

"There goes Anson Carr, the famous architect!"

Well, half his dream had come true. At least he was recognized in public places. But he couldn't feel much satisfaction in the circumstances which had pushed him forward. He had the true artist's distaste for money without creative justification, and there was something ironical and humiliating in the fact that what local fame he had achieved had been swamped utterly in the questionable glamour of his new estate. He set his lips together. Well, he would show the public that wealth could be converted into a stepping-stone to something worthy. He would make them forget that he had fallen heir to a large and demoralizing inheritance. And, with a start, he came out of his reverie to a realization that he was nearing the spot which had bound up tragedy and good fortune in one swift stroke. Quite as suddenly the man at the wheel leaned back and said:

"The accident happened there . . .

straight ahead where you see the break in the fence. . . . It wasn't the first death on that turn, and it won't be the last."

Anson Carr bent sidewise and looked down at the brush-covered hillside rolling to an abrupt and cruel depth. Instinctively he put his hand upon the shoulder of the driver.

"Let's stop a moment," he suggested.

The man obeyed, reaching for a cigarette. "Did you know them?" he inquired.

"The man was my uncle," Carr finally admitted. And, almost at once, he wondered whether he had made the proper reply.

The driver gave him a look of amazed interest. "Oh, you're the fellow who came into all the money!" he drawled, incredulously. "Live in San Francisco?"

Anson Carr nodded. He knew what the man was thinking—if an interested relation waited months before visiting the scene of tragedy, why come at all? Without further calculation he broke out, apologetically, "I've been away, you see,"—in his haste to justify himself, quite ignoring the fact that he had lied shamelessly and to very little purpose.

The driver looked reassured. "They must have been dead a good part of an hour before they were found," he volunteered, with the keen delight of a man called upon for harrowing details. "I never could figure how the guy who saw them lying there ever got the bodies out."

Carr again debated swiftly the expediency of prolonging the topic. "A Greek found them, I believe."

"Yes—one of the trackwalkers for

the railroad. He'd come up this way after some fool weed them Greeks use for salad. He don't look so awful husky, but it takes a good man to carry two dead ones up a grade like that and not drag them any, either."

Carr's voice assumed a casual interest. "A trackwalker for the railroad! Then he must live somewhere about here."

The driver started the machine. "I'll show you his place when we get to the top of the hill."

The bus crawled languidly up the grade, gathering speed as its effort became prolonged. Carr leaned back in his seat and gave himself up to fragmentary speculations. Hedged on one side by the tawny bank into which the road ate its sinuous way, and on the other by a monotonous slope of dun-colored chaparral, the landscape lacked interest. Carr was glad of one thing—at least it was a clear day; at this point the usual midsummer fog *would* have been depressing.

He was still toying fastidiously with his thoughts when the machine came to an abrupt stop. They had reached the summit of the hill and before them a sapphire-blue surge of ocean stretched unbroken to the sky line. A little gasp of astonishment and delight escaped him. It was unusual for the ocean-shore country of central California to be colored with such tropic splendor.

He was recalled from his momentary ecstasy by the pressure of the driver's fingers against his shoulder. "There," the man was saying, pointing in a direct line below, "in that corrugated-iron shack near the siding—that's where the Greek who found them lives."

Carr looked down. A single and rather forlorn-looking railroad track skirted perilously near the edge of a treacherous cliff; in a jagged curve in the hillside, the sun fell glistening upon a blue-silver hut lying at the end of a trail beaten through the fragmentary shale of the mountainside. A thin curl of smoke rose languidly in the amber air. Evidently the Greek was at home.

"I don't think I'll go any farther," he declared, somewhat lamely, as he made a movement suggestive of escape. "When does the next bus go back?"

The driver stared incredulously. "About three-thirty from this point. . . . But you never can tell, there may be a full house."

Anson Carr stepped stiffly out upon the oil-blue highway. "I'll risk it!" he said, brusquely with an air of dismissal.

But the man at the wheel was not put out of countenance by any such abrupt leave-taking. Instead of shooting the car forward, he leaned out with irritating assumption as he said:

"If you want any dope, that Greek is the last person in the world to go to. . . . He only understands English when it suits him. . . . And it usually doesn't."

A dull resentment flickered in the suppressed warmth of Carr's retort.

"I'm used to handling Greeks," he flung back, briefly.

The driver shrugged his shoulders and started the bus on its way again.

Anson Carr stood irresolutely before the trail's well-defined source. He did not trust his feet to its treacherous length at once; instead, he squatted Oriental-wise and gazed into the far-flung horizon, across which two full-rigged sailing vessels were crawling with placid patience.

The bus driver had not told Anson Carr anything new. Everybody had said the same thing:

"The Greek won't talk—you can't get anything out of him."

Every time he heard the stock phrase repeated he had smiled inwardly, framing contemptuous conclusions regarding the trackwalker's stubborn silence. Of course they couldn't get anything out of him! One had to know the breed to set successfully a trap for snaring confidences. If one understood sufficiently, one might read a satisfactory answer to the question put in the very manner it was evaded. A lift of the eyebrows

might tell him infinitely more than the clipped directness of a terse aye or nay. And twenty years as an architect handling a fair complement of unskilled labor, in season and out, had given Anson Carr certain avenues of approach to aliens which were obviously closed to others.

As he balanced himself close to the edge of that tawny cliff overlooking the sea, he tried for the hundredth time to analyze the impulse which had drawn him at the eleventh hour toward a more or less futile investigation. He supposed that a less introspective nature would have accepted the Greek's silence and thanked God that it had helped him to a speedy possession of a totally undeserved fortune. His uncle had been nothing to him—indeed, he had felt a violent dislike for him—and his aunt, by the same token, had been equally remote. When Alexander Holman had recouped his squandered fortune by marrying a rich widow from New York, Anson Carr had remarked ironically to his wife:

"Well, at last he's struck a soft berth!"

But on the day news had come that Holman had gone over a bank near Montara, killing himself and his wife instantly, he had not even bothered to report the matter to Nancy. The next morning, as the family was at breakfast, the children had pounced upon the story eagerly. He remembered now their morbid curiosity in the details and how it had ruffled him. And how equally irritating had been his wife's:

"I wonder who'll get all the money?"

He had never thought of himself in this connection. His uncle had nothing, and Mrs. Holman's fortune would, of course, go to her people. He had been inclined to scoff when his lawyer had rung him up to make an appointment. But at the end of that interview his attitude of indifference had suffered a distinct change. Not that the lawyer's argument had won him. There were still too many difficulties which a man of sen-

sibilities would shrink from encompassing. But the main facts of the case held potentialities. Alexander Holman and his wife, unless testimony was forthcoming to the contrary, had both met death almost instantly. Failing actual knowledge, the law always assumed that the woman under such circumstances was the first to die. Mrs. Holman had left a will settling every penny on her husband. Anson Carr was his legal heir. The inference was obvious.

Developments had been swift. So far it appeared that he had every legal right to his astounding inheritance. Even Mrs. Holman's sister had admitted that much in a letter that had been dignified to a point of well-bred contempt. . . . Obviously, the lady was not in want, else she would not have been so scornfully indifferent.

When he had wavered a bit his lawyer had reassured him with the irrefutable statement that he had just as much right to gather the fruits of chance as the next fellow. But Anson Carr was still a bit in doubt; he wanted to make sure that the dice had been thrown fairly. If he had the rights of chance upon his side, then so did Mrs. Holman's sister. The Greek trackwalker was the only person who could settle the point. And, according to report, the Greek was curiously noncommittal.

Upon the brink of ending all uncertainty, Carr felt the curious reluctance which often confronts a man at the crucial moment.

He rose slowly from his squatting posture, hesitating a moment before he began to descend the jagged path. His weight released bits of shattered rock and set them tumbling downward toward the solitary railroad track. He wondered what whim had raised a dwelling place in this desolate spot. The slopes were without the charity of even a bleached turf, much less a sweep of greensward, and only here and there a golden splash of wild poppies struggled through the stony surface to a belated blossoming. But when he had accom-

plished the trail's length, a clear and ice-cold drip of water betrayed the reason for choosing such an otherwise forbidding location—a land bitten by summer drought could be scornful of every circumstance save lack of water.

A hard, frugal cleanliness was over everything. The space in front of the open door was swept bare of rock fragments, revealing a tawny and sun-baked sod. At one side, close to the silver dribble of the hill, a little garden had been achieved by the peasant's ardor for contact with the soil. Shallow rows of crisp lettuce, a few darkly green plants of the horse bean, parsley, a savory herb or two—these fruits of primitive tillage made the desolation smile with human homeliness.

Anson Carr stepped into the shadow of the doorway. A fragrant odor of stewing mutton, touched with garlic, gave him a pleasant pang of hunger. He knocked, and, without waiting for an invitation, entered. Fresh as he was from the sun's midday glare, the room's gracious gloom revealed only the dimmest of outlines. He sensed rather than saw the figure of a man spring into dusky life, and quickly he defended his unceremonious entrance with a perfectly worded apology, eschewing the clipped English that would have risen to the lips of the provincial and tactless. He was tired and hungry and in a strange bit of country, he explained, and, seeing a house surrounded by a pleasant garden, he had made free to enter. The Greek, snared at once by the challenge to his hospitality, came forward, his thickly clustered hair dipping ceremoniously in a series of sweeping bows: He was cooking a meal—a very poor meal, to be sure—but if the gentleman would honor him. . . .

Anson Carr returned a smiling acceptance. "Mutton and rice?" he half queried. "Only the Greeks know how to cook that dish."

The Greek beamed, flashing white teeth. Had the gentleman been in Greece, by any chance?

Unfortunately, no . . . but at the Minerva Café in San Francisco. . . .

It was not necessary to say anything more. Immediately, Anson Carr's swarthy host renewed his sweeping gestures of welcome. His mutton and rice could not be compared to the fare at the Minerva, but such as it was he offered it upon the shrine of hospitality.

The Greek drew a bench out from the wall, setting it close to the simply laid table, as he ushered Carr to a seat. When he crossed over to lift the lid from the steaming pot upon the stove, the delicious odors that escaped filled Anson Carr with anticipatory delight. He leaned forward with both elbows on the rude, uncovered table. He was hungry and pleasantly tired, and, so far, quite satisfied with his progress. At least he had established one fact—the Greek's ability to understand and speak English.

Presently a huge plate of mutton stew and rice swimming in a rich gravy and covered with boiled lettuce leaves stood in the center of the table. The Greek poured out two tin cups of water, making a fine gesture of disdain as he laid one at each place.

It was the very devil itself to get wine these days at any price, he explained, rather heatedly. For a moment Anson Carr narrowed his eyes. Why hadn't he thought of bringing a quart of claret with him? A moistened tongue always ran along more smoothly. Well, it was too late now, and in default of such assistance he fell back upon the expediency of voicing a racial interest in the man opposite him. The Greek, with that ardor which any and all of his countrymen always brought to a recital of national glories, glowed warmly under the spell of Carr's rapt and provocative silence. Indeed, his lyrical outburst became so swift and vehement that his guest was unable to follow him. But presently, Anson Carr, discovering that the monologue had traveled back to the physical glories of ancient Greece, leaned forward as he said, quite casually:

"The Greeks have always been strong

people. . . . The bus driver tells me that you, yourself, carried two dead bodies up a steep hill through the brush without dragging them. Is that the truth?"

For a moment the very atmosphere of the room was darkened by the Greek's swarthy scowl. "Yes—" he threw back, "but that is nothing."

Carr broke a thick crust from the round loaf at his elbow. His heart was pounding and his lips had dried with curious suddenness.

"It showed strength, just the same. For my part, I believe I'd have had to drag them. . . . They *were* dead, weren't they—*both of them?*"

The Greek's displeasure merged swiftly into an impassive mask of unconcern. "How should I know?" he shrugged. "I'm not a doctor."

Anson Carr let out a quick gasp of almost painful relief.

He did not wait for the bus; instead, he decided to walk the track into Pedro and take the train. The Greek's evasive answer to his direct question had been far from reassuring, and yet he had been glad to escape with the question still unsettled. He was frightened now at the realization of how near he had come to pulling down his house of cards upon his head. He wished he could go home and talk the matter over calmly with his wife. But he knew how futile any discussion would be with Nancy. She had been determined and decisive from the first, putting her argument forward with all the personal bias of motherhood:

"What is Mrs. Holman's sister to you? Why not think of your own for a change?"

Her retort had stung him. It was flavored with a subtle reproach at his inadequacy, which he recognized only too well. He had started his career with high hopes—a yearning to do big things. He had it in him—he felt this, with that curious conviction which pervades artists of any calling. Yet he had allowed expediency to swamp his ambitions. Not

that his work had been unworthy, but it had been limited in its scope. He had never had the leisure for magnificent flights. With a brood of fledglings shrilling for their daily keep, it took something more than genius to deny substantial but uninspired commissions. Anson Carr did not regret his family, but only he knew the price he had paid for it. Alone he could have starved and dreamed, and in the end created something lasting. As it was, he had had to be content with mere dreaming. Yet he had managed to achieve one or two distinctly good structures in these later years, modest buildings that had inspired praise which whetted his appetite for greater triumphs. He knew that Nancy had felt something of his struggles, for, finding him still somewhat cold before her maternal arguments, she had finished by saying:

"After all, you can do now what you've always longed to do . . ." at this point discreetly letting the subject drop.

*What he had always longed to do!* The realization made him spiritually dizzy. He knew well enough why his creative flights were doomed to endless and futile circlings. He had never, for one thing, had the opportunity to go to the sources of inspiration and of drinking deeply of their stimulating flow. In the old days, what would he not have given to spend a year, a month, a day, even in the shadow of St. Peter's, or within the walls of the Alhambra, or before the robust and yet misty altar of some Gothic cathedral! How he had longed to go over and steep his soul in the quiet flood of the past, waiting patiently for the rebirth, through him, of some pregnant seed of its beauty! . . . At the beginning he had not been without hopes for such a consummation, but as the years went on taking their toll he had decided that he was fated to taste these joys only vicariously. He was still a young man, and, while his family ties had tethered him, they had not bound his spirit utterly. He could still see

visions, although their outlines had been growing dimmer. And, now, fate had put the means in his hand for making all these flagging hopes come true. It would not be a matter of months to be spent among the monumental achievements of the Old World; he could stay for years—forever, if need be. And suddenly he was swept with a feeling of intense weariness, as if his spirit had used up all its reserve energy in the struggle for mere existence. He felt that even if he were to go on turning out unimportant architectural records of his soul's starvation, he would need some respite, some stimulus. Yet, in the face of his exhaustion, he had been foolish enough to tempt fate with almost morbid daring.

He felt that he never again wanted to find himself as shaken as he had been at that moment when he had hung fearfully on the trackwalker's possible revelations. For, somehow, such a crisis tried out a man's soul too ruthlessly, and he was beginning to realize how humiliating it was to come too close to one's spiritual nakedness. He ceased to have any wish to be fair. Instead, he felt a sudden and primitive impulse to fight to the last ditch against any and everything that threatened to destroy his belated moment of realization.

The train was delayed by a bowlder tumbling across the track from one of the shifting cliffs, and Anson Carr was late for dinner. He decided not to offer an explanation.

"You're sunburnt," his wife had observed, with a tone of mild curiosity.

"Yes—I've been out in the open," was his noncommittal reply.

The children were full of tentative and, on the whole, rather expensive plans for the winter. Gladys had decided upon horseback riding three times a week through the Park with an exclusive riding club; Bob had been looking over a score of high-power cars; even Ruth, despite her scant twelve years, was voicing ambitions that had the dis-

tinct tang of affluence. Nancy sat back and listened, amused and indulgent, secretly pleased that her feathering brood could take the wing with such sweeping confidence. But Anson Carr was annoyed, and, after the children had deserted the table, leaving their parents as usual to dawdle over their black coffee, he said to Nancy, a bit sharply:

"In Heaven's name, where do the children get all these expensive notions? I hope you're not encouraging them in such foolishness."

She set her lip with the defensive hardness that he was beginning to know so well. "Encouraging them!" she echoed, tartly. "They're not altogether fools. Surely they have a right to expect a little something in advance—now that their future is assured."

"I think their future was pretty well assured in any case. We've never been exactly paupers. . . . Besides, nothing is certain. And you'd better tell them so before they have a chance to make fools of themselves."

"I thought everything was settled."

"Settled? With the chief witness silent? . . . Nothing is ever settled when a person refuses to go on record. . . . The case might be reopened at any time. . . . As a matter of fact, I've been all afternoon trying to get this Greek trackwalker to talk."

She thrust aside her cup with an impatient gesture. "I should think you'd let well enough alone. First thing you know that man will scent trouble. If you keep picking at him he's likely to say anything."

Her heat gave him the cue for a deliberate coolness. "I think he scents trouble *now*. In fact, he must have suspected something from the first. These Greeks, you know, are chary of legal entanglements. They have an almost Oriental respect for the law—or, I should say, fear. And fear always leads to evasion."

She followed his explanation with a more tolerant attitude. "Isn't it more than likely," she began, cautiously, "that he's waiting to be convinced?"

"Possibly."

She did not speak at once. There was something awkward and ominous in this pause. She was cutting a design upon the tablecloth with a sharp finger nail when she finally said, almost inaudibly:

"Well, if you were to make it worth his while, perhaps—"

Anson Carr made no reply.

He had a vague feeling that he should have manifested displeasure, but instead he found himself repeating, silently:

"So at last it has come to this!"

And he was conscious that his mental exclamation held more of fulfilled expectancy than surprise.

He did not broach the subject to Nancy again. It was as if, having lifted the veil of her reserve, he had a fear of chancing further glimpses. Like every man with ideals, he had clothed the object of his affections in a shimmer of virtue and at this stage he was unwilling to disclose imperfections which his fancy had kept covered. Concerning himself, he was maintaining less and less illusion; that was why it was needful to conserve passionately his illusion in others. For the most part, he kept introspection at arm's length. He was trying to establish the ability to accept the favor of the gods on its face value without undue questioning. The children still talked extravagantly, airing their opulent desires. Sometimes he wondered if their prodigal expectations were not tinged with subtle encouragement from their mother. Doubtless she felt that the more firmly they laid hands upon the future the more difficult would be any attempts to destroy it.

Meanwhile, all the legal entanglements in connection with his inheritance unsnarled with surprising swiftness. The complete, but by no means disturbing, aloofness of Mrs. Holman's sister continued. He began to plan, definitely, now, for his future. He no longer kept his expectations to himself. Instead, he went about with steamship folders and second-hand books of travel. He asked

everybody he met about hotels, *pensions*, interesting towns off the beaten track. He found himself expanding like some belated blossom denied its appointed season by a prolonged bleakness. And, as he passed people, in hotel lobbies, or cafés, or theater foyers, he heard them whisper his name, saw them stare, glimpsed the mingled admiration and envy in their glances. He was Anson Carr, the man who had come into "all that money." And the public were reacting, like children, to the glamour of some fairy tale. There were those of his confreres who shook their heads. "He fancies he's going to do big things," they would say. "But of course he won't; it's too late. And, besides, so much money is demoralizing." Others, more friendly, conceded that his opportunity for growth was unlimited. "A man without financial pressure can achieve *his* desires, not other people's." In short, it was not long before the subject of Anson Carr began to be debated furiously. He became an abstract question. In him a theory remained to be tested. Even the newspapers took him up; architects, actors, painters, writers, clubwomen, were asked to give their opinions as to whether the inheritance of a huge fortune was helpful or inimical to the best traditions of art. He ended by being more apprehensive than annoyed. What, in Heaven's name, had possessed him to allow himself to become public property? But, on second thought, he realized that he had accomplished the thing deliberately. Like his children, he was laying firm hands upon the future by flooding the stage so full of light that it would be impossible for him to back off unseen.

Whenever he thought of that terrifying trip to the corrugated-iron shack near the railroad siding he grew cold all over. Thank God, that had ended neutrally! Finally he dismissed the whole thing from his mind. Indeed, he had fancied the issue quite settled when one day, chancing to visit the Greek quarter in search of some unskilled labor for a

friendly contractor, whom should he bump into but his Greek trackwalker.

The man halted with a smile of recognition and the usual sweeping bow. He had grown tired of the little hut overlooking the sea, and so he had quit for a week or two. Without quite realizing it, Anson Carr found himself inviting his swarthy friend to join him in a cup of Turkish coffee.

They went into the first coffeehouse at hand, and sat down at one of the marble-topped tables. The room was almost deserted. Carr never remembered seeing one of these Greek coffeehouses so empty, even at this slack hour. The proprietor himself came forward to wait upon them, a melancholy smile upon his face. As he gave the order, Carr remarked the lack of patronage. The proprietor became more and more wistful as he recited his woes. Prohibition had killed everything—even the coffeehouses. When he left to prepare the coffee, the trackwalker took up the lament. He missed his wine, and as for *mastica*—He finished with a gesture of ultimate despair, running his hands through his thick hair tragically. If he had enough money he would leave at once for his native land. Ah yes, Greece was the country of delight. There one could have the fruit of the vine, and people danced upon feast days, and the sunlight was like spun gold.

Anson Carr listened indifferently to his companion's chatter. It was the old lyrical outburst that he knew so well. But when the proprietor broke in upon them with two thick and steaming coffees, he had a sense that the trackwalker had paused, evidently in polite expectation of a retort.

"So if you had money enough you'd go back home!" The Greek nodded and began to sip his coffee. Anson Carr had a sudden inspiration. "I suppose," he broke out again, "that it wouldn't be possible to get something stronger than coffee here?" The trackwalker stared. "A taste of *mastica*, for instance?"

The man opposite him shrugged with delightful candor.

"One can get nothing without asking," he returned, tranquilly.

Anson Carr beckoned the waiter, who had retreated to his position near the coffee shelf. He answered the signal at once. Carr put the question squarely. There followed an animated reply significant with phrases enlarging upon the difficulties of complying with such an outrageous request. Anson Carr listened patiently. At the end he said, emphatically:

"Bring us two—and say no more about it."

The man smiled widely and hustled away. The trackwalker let out a low sigh of anticipation.

The *mastica* had been diluted, there was no doubt of that, but it still had the power to quicken both the pulse and the imagination. Under its influence the Greek grew more and more talkative and Anson Carr more and more retrospective. The taste of this colorless, aric-flavored stimulant revived in Carr the memory of days when the quarter had been warmed to racial geniality by this national drink. Then the coffeehouses had been crowded, and men had danced together their old ceremonial dances and sipped their coffee with much jesting and a good deal of laughter.

In those days he had come down frequently just for relaxation. And, somehow, he had always gone away refreshed by the naïveté of it all. He found himself vaguely speculating whether he would go away refreshed in this instance, and, noticing that his guest had finished his *mastica* in one final gulp of satisfaction, he ordered another. The trackwalker began to talk with even greater insistence: This was the life . . . something to drink . . . friends to talk to . . . nothing to do! How lonesome he had been on that railroad siding with the sea forever making ominous noises! He was not accustomed to the sea; he was from the mountains.



. . . A sheep herder? Yes, in his youth. . . . No, shepherding was not a lonely life. . . . One had dogs and lambs and the birds of the forest for company. . . . There were birds along the California shore, of course, screaming, melancholy things of no account. . . . The sea lapping the sands of Greece? Ah, that was different! Not cold and gray and forbidding at any time. No, if one could believe it, the sea in that favored spot was always a thing of sky-blue and gold.

Anson Carr found himself intrigued and carried away by the exile's lament. He had a wish that the man would continue to talk of nothing but his native land . . . he wanted to escape with him into a rosy-flushed horizon of dreams. But presently the Greek's background shifted, for contrast, undoubtedly. He came back with a pull to the corrugated-iron hut along the edge of the Pacific. It *had* been lonely, he reiterated. For days he would talk to no one. . . . Of course, immediately after the accident—

"The accident?" Anson Carr found himself echoing with a strange terror.

Yes, the accident . . . two people killed. Didn't the gentleman remember? Well, after that, for a season crowds of people had swarmed in on him, asking all sorts of questions. But he had been wise. He had refused to answer anybody. . . . That was right, wasn't it . . . after an accident to do no talking? . . . The law was a crafty matter. . . . If one kept one's mouth shut things soon mended, but if one talked . . . well, in that case anything was possible. . . . He had a countryman once who went into a lonely hut in the mountains and found a man dying . . . and, would you believe it? they tried to prove that this countryman had committed a murder. Yes, and all because the man had talked, in his excitement stating things that were afterward proved to be untrue. . . . Not that the man had lied, but at such times one does not always see correctly—one imagines things. . . . Ah, but he had profited by this countryman's experi-

ence! and when people had come, asking him slyly certain questions, he had either shrugged his shoulders or returned a meaningless answer.

"Questions. What sort of questions?" Anson Carr put in, deftly.

"They always asked the same thing, my friend—which had died first, the man or the woman."

For a moment Anson Carr was distracted by the audible buzzing of a fly hovering just above his coffee cup. He waved the intruder away as he leaned forward with confidential air of comradeship and said, point-blank:

"And who *did* die first?" I'm curious, too."

The Greek trackwalker smiled cryptically. "I could answer that if I wanted to. . . . Well, maybe I will. We are good friends, eh? What do you say?"

Anson Carr felt his heart sink suddenly. He had an impulse to rise and leave at once, but instead he found himself replying:

"Wait. . . . After we've had another drink!"

And with that the proprietor came forward, carrying two deceitful black coffee cups on a tray.

He speculated, afterward, as he set his course toward home, what perversity tempted men to stir up the pools of content? Why could not one accept the crystal clearness of still water instead of taking issue with its slimy bed? Was there really something fundamental in both physical and spiritual existence at odds with serenity? Something which drove a man on and on, from one disillusionment to another, toward the ultimate resignation? Was life a perpetual Bluebeard's chamber, luring the curious to destruction with the snare of a closed door? He wondered what Nancy would say—would think. Should he take her into his confidence? Nowadays he had a sort of terror in her presence, realizing that he was no match for her—that no male was a match for any female defending the claims of her progeny. He knew

that his part in the problem had ceased to move her. She merely traded on his desires to achieve a desirable end for her children. When he enlarged upon the glories of his future she smiled tolerantly. He had a feeling that, in the end, she would be content to let him ramble off and dream alone.

He found her helping the Japanese servant clear away evidences of an informal tea table. She had stripped the garden of its riot of dahlias and the room quite glowed with their flamboyant color. It was a pleasant room, Anson Carr found himself admitting, even if it was of his own designing. He dropped into a seat beside the silver tea urn. He was glad to be back in the delightfully screened interior. It was full of little intimate revelations, which seemed to sum up, in their quiet and orderly beauty, the complete history of his married life.

"Ah, this *is* good, after all! . . . It would be hard to improve on this room, Nancy. We've done well with it, and no mistake."

She was still glowing warmly with the animated intimacies of the tea hour, and her manner was almost brilliant as she threw back:

"Oh, this is nothing. Wait till you see what we can do with a *real* back-ground!"

For the first time it came to him that already Nancy was planning to abandon her present environment for something more impressive. The realization wounded him. This home had been the one free and perfect expression of his creative power. It lacked magnificence, but it was filled with an unhampered sincerity.

"What better could anyone want than this?" he demanded.

She met his challenge with an indulgent laugh.

"I'll show you, some day," she retorted. "You've no idea how much money can buy."

"Money!" he sneered.

She misread his contempt. "You

must be tired," she suggested. "Better let me make you a cup of tea."

He made a gesture of refusal. "I've been drinking coffee all afternoon."

"Coffee? How absurd! No wonder you're all on edge."

"Well, there was something stronger, too. I was looking up some men for O'Connell, and I ran into that Greek trackwalker. We went into a café for Turkish coffee . . . we ended by drinking *masticas*. He talked me into a headache."

She sat down opposite him, brushing aside a golden shower of pollen which had scattered from one of the bouquets upon the shining surface of the center table.

"Did you learn anything . . . new?"

He turned upon her with a curious impulse to wound. "Nothing but what I've expected. . . . *She* was alive when he found them. . . ."

There followed an interval of portentous silence, broken by the sound of Carr's cigarette holder tapping against the arm of his chair.

"Ah," floated toward him finally, upon a breath painfully released, "then we are in *his* hands, after all. . . . Can't you persuade him to go away?"

He lit a match wearily. "He's going back . . . to Greece. We settled that question before I left him."

"Does he suspect?"

"One never can be sure—with a peasant. . . . But a man with wits usually knows from which quarter the wind blows." She rose with a nervous movement, releasing her disquiet in a trivial rearrangement of the dahlias. It was not until her back was turned that he gathered courage for the next thrust. "I'll see my lawyer in the morning."

She faced him swiftly. "Surely you're not going to be fool enough to tell *him*!"

"Not that, at any rate. But it's only decent to offer Mrs. Holman's sister something . . . *now*."

"Why?"

"Why! In God's name, what would you have me do?"

She met the thrust with a quick mental side-step. "The man may be lying."

"That isn't likely."

"And, besides, a compromise might arouse her suspicions. Next thing she'll come flying out here. If she offers that Greek more . . . he'll stay."

He left his seat deliberately. "No, she wouldn't stoop to that. Her letters prove she isn't that kind of a woman."

She gave a defiant toss of her head. "Well, if I were you, I know what I'd do—I'd make up my mind to take it all or nothing."

He folded his arms with an air of insolent tolerance. "And, being yourself, what then?"

She looked at him squarely. "Being myself, I wouldn't yield up *one penny*. . . Mrs. Holman's sister is nothing to me."

He swept her from head to foot with an appraising glance. Curiously enough, her words did not shock him. Instead, he was forced into grudging admiration. She had the courage of her maternal ruthlessness, at all events.

He was sure that Nancy's all-or-nothing theory had been a matter of sheer bravado, one of those magnificent gestures which a cornered antagonist makes in the hope of confusing an adversary. Nevertheless, the logic was irrefutable. Even insincerity could not disguise the inherent soundness of such a position. Yet, in spite of his conviction he saw his lawyer and the offer was made. He felt an enormous relief. Somehow, he had a vague feeling that an acceptance of his terms would divide the responsibility—that, by yielding to a compromise, Mrs. Holman's sister would become party to his duplicity. But beneath the surface of his content lurked a latent apprehension. He decided to leave as few loopholes for wavering as possible. He announced that he would not wait until spring to accomplish his long-deferred pilgrimage to the shrines of his art. He was going at once. As he suspected, Nancy begged for a postponement, so

far as she was concerned. There were the children, and— He merely shrugged his shoulders and went and arranged transportation for himself.

He was kept very busy, for he soon discovered that he had the departure of the Greek trackwalker to accomplish. When he first had made the offer it had seemed the simplest thing imaginable—a certain sum forthcoming and that would be the end of it. But at once complications arose, matters of a passport and all the awkward questions which conditions abroad at this time raised. Hardly a day passed when the Greek was not hovering about his office with obsequious patience; He wanted to give no offense and be of the least trouble in the world, but if Mr. Carr would spare a few moments to go with him to the Greek consul, they could at once settle such and such an issue. Or he required some sort of a letter of credit and would his patron mind introducing him to his banker? Or there was need of witnesses to the fact that he was born thus and so. What was to be done about it? All this might have been tolerable had the trackwalker been content to allow Anson Carr to pose merely as an adviser, but he seemed to take an almost diabolical joy in proclaiming the true relationship. This American was his patron, an astounding man, truly, who was making him a present of a ticket home just out of pure love and affection. And in the presence of any and all of his countrymen he would embrace Anson Carr fervently and with embarrassing ardor. Carr remonstrated. It was not necessary to proclaim the news from the housetops—he did not care to have his generosity become public property. But he merely wasted breath. By way of answer, his protégé made a series of sweeping bows and declared that it was not the custom of his country to hide the light of a friend's worthiness under a bushel. Of what profit was virtue if its praise remained unsung?

All this was tiresome enough when performed before an audience composed

of strangers, and Anson Carr fell to wondering if some day the circle of auditors would not widen to include an acquaintance or even an intimate. And almost before the speculation had escaped him the fear was realized. The Greek, breaking hastily into the office one day, had found Carr coming out the door in company with his lawyer. It was useless to stem the tide of speech which overwhelmed them in a lyrical flood: Everything was finally settled and on Monday he was to start home—the ticket bought and all the other tiresome tangles unknotted. And on Saturday afternoon a great feast at the corrugated-iron shack near the ocean, an *al fresco* affair, with a whole sheep roasted, and Greek music and shepherd dancing. He had come to make certain that his worthy patron would be there—he was consumed with a desire to present such a paragon of generosity to his countrymen. And here he turned to Anson Carr's lawyer: Fancy a man out of sheer compassion providing the means for homeward flight to a stranger sorrowing for his native land!

Carr dismissed the man with a rather curt acceptance of the invitation. To have refused would have led to a string of irritating protests. Was the Greek simple, or extraordinarily profound?

He came from the haze of this idle speculation into the casual significance of his lawyer's query:

"That's the man who pulled Mr. and Mrs. Holman out of the wreck, isn't it?"

He fumbled a bit mentally, deciding in the end to chance a discreet frankness. "Yes. . . . I think, everything considered, that the best place for *him* is home!" And, finding his lawyer disturbingly noncommittal, he was forced to hide his uneasiness behind an empty and cynical laugh.

He had no heart for the trackwalker's celebration, but it seemed best to go through with the ordeal. As he expected, he was the center of attraction, barring the roasted sheep and the thin

dribbles of smuggled wine enlivening the occasion. There was an Homeric quality to the feast, and the sun came out of a dun-colored mist to warm the sea into Hellenic splendor. Under ordinary circumstances Anson Carr would have been completely captivated—at the feasting, at the rhythmic wailings of the violin and piccolo, at the long line of men dancing with alternate solemnity and abandon. He was a man who welcomed escapes from the commonplace, but how was one to escape into even an external beauty with the fiction of a questionable worthiness dinned constantly into one's ears? At the beginning he had taken the trackwalker aside and said:

"Cut me out. Do you understand? . . . I mean, let us have no more of this praise. . . . Say nothing of my hand in all this."

To which his faithful friend had raised indescribably mournful eyes in protest. "But consider—this feast is not for me, my friend! It is in your honor. We must say something of our patron."

Further protest was useless. He had to smile through all the encomiums that were heaped upon him. Even granting the Oriental extravagance of their words, he began to sense that these men *did* think him an open-handed benefactor who distributed his boons with a regal contempt for self-interest. To them he was a bit of poetry made life—a reincarnation of those enchanted days when the gods stalked abroad and let their favors fall where and upon whom they would. Even the trackwalker shared his countrymen's illusion. Anson Carr could see that now only too plainly. And, somehow, he felt humiliated by the emptiness of his triumph. He was like a pretender raised upon a throne, knowing himself the falseness of his claim.

He got away from it all as quickly as possible. In the hope that he might have a few moments of solitude, he had scorned flagging the train at the siding, insisting that he wished to walk into Pedro instead. Walk? *He*, their benefactor? No, it was not to be thought of!

Instead, they carried him in triumph on their shoulders, with the piccolo player in advance. Thus had he entered the village with children and all the curious trooping out to join in the festivity. And in the midst of it all the track-walker, standing upon the mail truck, saying in a loud voice:

"You cannot think what this man has done. . . . For pure love and affection he pays my way home to my native land. . . . Yes, for love and nothing else. What have you to say to that?"

And the train pulling in, he was put to the further embarrassment of embraces from all the company and kisses implanted on either cheek in brotherly and Christian salutation.

Once seated, he leaned out of the car window, answering their farewell shouts with as eloquent a gesture as he could muster. . . . A sense of humiliation engulfed him again. If the Greek had only suspected how much easier it would have been! Was it possible that he was to tread the path of self-contempt alone? . . . Well, there was at least Mrs. Holman's sister. With cynical delight he turned his thoughts from the stale and unprofitable afternoon. To tug at his adversary's patronizing inflexibility with all the strength of compromise gave him a curious satisfaction. Pulling himself back to the heights was too great an effort. At this point it seemed easier to drag another down. He began to speculate about the exact date of *his* sailing. He was glad Nancy had decided to wait. He wanted to be alone with his dreams—*utterly alone!* He had never realized before how greatly he had longed for freedom.

He was late again for dinner, but this time Nancy met him in the hallway. She had an envelope in her hand.

"Where have you been?" she challenged, moving toward him nervously.

"The Greek had a farewell. It was absurd, of course, my going, but there are some things one can't escape. . . . He leaves to-morrow."

Her face glowed with a warm relief. "Ah, then that's settled! . . . They've been trying to get hold of you. Word has come, I believe from Mrs. Holman's sister. I suggested they send the letter here. A boy brought it an hour or so ago."

"What did it say?"

"I haven't opened it."

He took the envelope from her. She retreated to the empty fireplace, resting one hand upon the mantel as she watched him. He read it through, measuring every word. When he had finished he turned a chill smile in her direction as he said, sneeringly:

"As usual, she declines all compromise. . . . She won't even give us the satisfaction of a fight. . . . She has your idea—*all or nothing!*"

Her hand fell to her side. "Just the same, it's well that the Greek is going home," she retorted, with a shade of malice. "By the way, when do you sail?"

He stared at her for an eternity, and in that moment every beautiful thing that he had ever dreamed passed before his eyes and mocked him.

"I guess that's all over, now," he heard himself say.

She came over to him swiftly, shaking him, as she might have shaken a child who had frightened her.

"What's the matter with you?" she almost shouted. "You can't mean that you intend to offer her *everything?*"

He tossed the envelope from him with a gesture of weariness. "Everything but my self-respect," he answered.

And, in a flash, he felt himself at once pitiful and triumphant—victorious, yet savorless—touched with a tragic but pallid splendor, alone in his white-bled glory.

